

MARS 101 Instruction Guide

Some Pointers for Trainers and Leaders

MARS 101 is a mini-course designed for two purposes. One, to **introduce** the membership to the *Road Ahead* program. And two, to **break the mold** of outdated training practices now that we're into the era of Internet and Winlink.

Please note the headline above. It addresses trainers first because getting the Army MARS started on the *Road Ahead* hinges on their energy and ingenuity in presenting it. This guide will offer some explanations and suggestions. It does not presume to instruct seasoned trainers on how to train.

In presenting the *Road Ahead* (as we'll be calling it here) let's be clear from the very beginning: The *Road Ahead* is **not** some sort of revolutionary departure for Army MARS. If it were, you'd want a lot longer than 12 weeks to prepare the members for it.

Getting up to speed: Yes, the bar is being raised on the FCC license requirement. Also on participation minimums, especially training. And instruction is being updated with new tools. But out in the real world so is the miles-per-gallon floor for automobiles and the M.P.H. ceiling on highways. Everywhere you look it's all about getting up to speed in a very changed environment—in our case, the environment of disaster communications so shaken by 9/11 and Katrina.

The mission isn't changing. What will change, as training **and** leadership proceed, is **mindset**. Army MARS is no longer to be viewed as a sort of free-standing assemblage of military-connected hams with an open-ended mission of unspecified support to unnamed customers in undefined circumstances.

To put it in a word, post-9/11 Army MARS is **focused**. What the *Road Ahead* will do is **sharpen** the focus.

With only one exception, the heightened standards of performance now being asked of MARS members are incremental/gradual, not radical/abrupt. This may need repeated emphasis.

Updating the toolbox: That one exception is *instructional doctrine*. Big words, those, to make a big point: Army MARS instructional doctrine will now call for using the new techniques and tools available (given our admittedly limited resources) to make the instruction inviting, interesting, perhaps even entertaining, but above all, effective.

We have to remember that while Army MARS has moved to WinLink and added deployment missions and taken on all sorts of new emcomm partnerships, the instructional arsenal provided to MARS trainers has evolved hardly at all. You have experienced FEMA's ICS interactive courses so you know what's meant by "instructional arsenal" today—video clips, sound bites, interactive quizzes, pop-up sidebars, exams that grade themselves, universal use of the Internet in ever-

more-imaginative ways. The whole kit bag may not be available to us yet but there's more than enough to get started.

Teaching techniques under analysis: This short course has been prepared by members with previous instructional experience in Army MARS, in industry and academia as well as the active-duty Army. They're worked in emergency operations, too.

The Tiger Team identified some particular problems that won't be news to trainers. The let's-fix list includes:

- Twenty-minute monologues that depend on old material and lack structured interaction (i.e. active audience participation).

- Many training cycles that make no allowance for the fact that members come and go at will; that by the end of the cycle the instructor may have covered the material but no one knows how many members were exposed to how much of it. (Can you imagine teaching antenna theory, or, say, how to operate and service a generator, to a class that regularly and randomly misses a third of the classes?)

- Instructional cycles that are set a month or quarter ahead with no allowance for exploiting fresh information, concurrent actual incidents, the Chief's Net Notes or pertinent items in the local news.

- Implementation of the Internet that has largely been confined to command uses, its value as an instructional tool mostly unexplored.

- The magic of imagination and improvisation, so valuable in most teaching environments, that has not been particularly encouraged by leaders. Nor has sufficient effort been made to identify members whose background or personal qualities might equip them for teaching on a regular or occasional basis.

Same highway, fast lane

Based on these observations, MARS 101 looks for new methods. And yes, there's an element of radical/abrupt. As the course material tries to make clear to the members, **urgency** is the reason for this one-time catch-up operation. Fasten your seatbelts.

Using the Internet: 12 Instructional text (units) will be provided to state directors for relay to members in the week before each MARS 101 session. HQ may occasionally have additional items, perhaps for trainers only, perhaps for the full membership (plainly labeled). **Trainers as well as state staff** are urged to augment the print package from HQ with their own e-mails to the class based on personal experience, past operations in the immediate area, applicable stories in the local news, etc.

This advance material is **homework**, not something to be read out on the net. Its whole purpose is to free up the on-air time for interaction as well as the trainer's own personal approach to presenting the subject. Trainers will receive lesson materials in time for preparation, but within the scope of that material their own innovation adapted to their own members is a vital tool.

Interaction: The first time a trainer asks a member to state on the air a definition or other factual element covered in the e-mailed unit material, the net should understand that MARS 101 homework isn't optional. State staff might make it known in advance of MARS 101 that there *will* be homework and it will be *mandatory*. Without the double-track approach—Internet and on-air—the *Road Ahead* training program would require months of on-air time. With the advance class material, preparation can be done at the member's convenience, unhurried.

It probably also should be said that interaction isn't just about enforcement. It's about giving members a role in the training, clearing up questions, relating their own experiences, offering alternative solutions to problems. The ideal weekly on-air class will give **every** participant a chance to be heard (or questioned) although that's a big order for the trainer. No doubt there will be the occasional over-talkative member who has to be cautioned, and things of that nature.

Class size: As in any school, the number in any one session has to be kept manageable. That pretty much rules out regionwide training nets in some areas. Some state directors may need to run parallel MARS 101 classes to keep participation in any one net to no more than 15 or so. That does indeed pose a challenge for leaders and trainers; the quality of the learning depends on it as every parent knows.

Mandatory Participation: This is of course the centerpiece of the new Army MARS approach to training. It is hardly unusual in the military or in industry, but it is new for Army MARS compared to the relaxed approach of the past (as evidenced by relaxed conformance to SOP).

The program asks members to arrange their personal schedules so they can attend 100 per cent of a 59-minute weekly class for 100 per cent of 12 weeks. State and Regional Staff will be asked to arrange several different nets designated as "MARS 101" nets, where the weekly training will be discussed and reviewed. 101 nets need to be scheduled in both daytime and evening time slots to make them available to all of the membership. If the State or Region has VHF nets, it will be up to the State and Region staff to decide if they need a 101 VHF net. State and Region Training Officers are charged with keeping track of membership participation. Members with less than 100 percent participation will be contacted and methods of possible make-up will be discussed and a plan worked out with the member. Make-up Nets can be scheduled as needed. If the member fails to cooperate with the training staff or fails to complete the training, that member will be reported up the chain of command. The Regional Command Staff (The Regional Director and the State MARS Director) will forward to Headquarters the names of those members who have failed to complete the training, and have failed to complete a remediation plan for removal from the MARS membership.

After MARS 101: This 12-week course isn't the end of *Road Ahead* instruction, it's only the beginning. In terms of *schedule*, normal region or state training will resume under region and state leadership. However, in terms of *method* and *content*, obviously it's assumed that trainers will build on, expand and improve on the MARS 101 model and continue to use the Internet for homework assignments as well as two-way interactive discussion on the nets.

One very specific request regarding this 12-week course: that during the daily training portion of regular traffic nets, the current week's 101 unit be brought up for additional discussion and comment from leadership. Interactive discussion of *Road Ahead* topics will be appropriate on all nets.

Final Examination: Feedback from trainers as the course proceeds will help in putting together a concise open-book quiz that might also include questions from the self-tests accompanying each Internet unit. This test is intended not as a barrier but an incentive. To that end, the views of leaders and trainers are welcomed on designating a "most valuable player" from each class as a more concrete incentive.

Annual requalifying: Once a year similar courses—MARS 102, 103, etc.—will be conducted to integrate changes in procedure with a review of ongoing doctrine. These will probably be shorter but the mandatory feature will apply. At its most basic, requalification is a self-protection measure for all members, assuring that in a desperate situation, the member you're sending urgent traffic to is fully up to standard on what to do and how to get it done. Requalification is also an important symbol to supported agencies attesting to the overall capability of Army MARS. The train-and-quiz method is straightforward, transparent, and fair to all.

Summing it all up

The *Road Ahead*, incremental or not, is a major undertaking for leaders and individual members alike, challenging most of all to those who undertake the training mission. The accompanying increase in workload plus discomfort with the post-9/11 environment may result in loss of some members. That is certainly not the intention. The motivation of this project is to increase the number of members by making the induction process more interesting and to improve the retention rate by making the mission we do more meaningful.

Accomplishing all that will be made easier by updated, sophisticated instructional doctrine. But in the end success depends on inspiration and that is in the hands of leaders and, first of all, the trainers.